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TAGS: [SCUL](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: SYRIAN YOUNG MEN COMPLAIN ABOUT MANDATORY MILITARY SERVICE

REF: DAMASCUS 56

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter For Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Young Syrian men often complain about their country's mandatory 21-month military service, which has been reduced by the SARG twice in the last four years given popular discontent with the law. The most commonly heard complaint about mandatory conscription is the uneven way in which exemptions to mandatory service are applied by local military conscription boards, including allegations that corruption plays a role in allowing some young men to avoid military service. Regardless of socio-economic background, young Syrian men agree military conscription nets disproportionate numbers of the uneducated and the poor. END SUMMARY.

"The System is Not Fair"

¶2. (C) On a recent afternoon at the campus of the University of Damascus, the conversation among a group of male students turned to a common subject - Syria's mandatory military service for young men. "I can't just plan for getting married and getting a job, I have to interrupt all of it for the army," a journalism student complained. "I still don't understand how half the guys at this school are getting out of national service, they're not all only sons," his friend added, referring to an exemption from service for only children or only sons. The students, mainly sons of the middle class without the financial resources or foreign language skills to take advantage of exemptions for those studying or working abroad while they are of military age, harshly criticized the way in which local military conscription boards applied exemptions to service. "The system is not fair," one of them concluded.

¶3. (C) All Syrian men are required to serve in the military upon reaching their 18th birthday. The SARG has twice reduced the time of service - from 2.5 years to 24 months in 2005 and again to 21 months in 2009 - reportedly due in part to popular opposition to forced conscription. University students can postpone their military service until after graduation, a rule many college students take advantage of. In addition to only sons, men "infected with chronic disease or other maladies preventing the infected from exerting any efforts" are exempted. Expatriate Syrians can avoid conscription if they pay \$6,500, a sum reduced from \$15,000 in 2009.

¶4. (C) Young Syrian men report these exemptions are applied unevenly by local military conscription boards, and some allege bribery can keep a young man out of the army. "The army in my hometown said that if we were working to support our families, we just had to pay 2,000 Syrian pounds and we could stay out of the army," a waiter originally from northeastern Syria related. He paid the money and has never been called up.

15. (C) At a recent gala dinner for the Syrian Young Entrepreneurs' Society (reftel) attended by generally affluent, foreign-educated young businesspeople, a young businessman stated "almost none of the guys in this room served in the army." He explained that most of the male attendees studied abroad and took advantage of exemptions for "expatriates." "One way or another, they find a way to pay their way out of the requirement. Look at the conscripts in the army. They are Bedouin, Kurdish, or poor," he explained.

16. (C) One of the most commonly abused exemptions is the health exemption, according to many young men. A Damascus University student concentrating in English and French studies stated he received an exemption for bad eyesight. "I told them I couldn't see, so they asked me to pay some money and that was it," he related. When asked why he didn't wear glasses or contacts, he said, "I got laser surgery right after I got the exemption." Damascus University students frequently complain young men fake their health problems, pay off conscription boards, and get out of military service.

#### Students Compare Their Experiences With Conscription Boards

17. (C) During a January 22 roadtrip to the mountains outside Damascus, four young men compared their experiences with the mandatory service rule. One recent graduate, a gym teacher named Safwan, said he had completed his mandatory service and described it as "difficult but rewarding." "I don't speak English or French so I couldn't go to Canada or France to study, and I didn't have any other choice but to go to the army," Safwan explained.

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18. (C) His three friends have all avoided military service thus far. A student concentrating in foreign languages named Emad received a health exemption. The other two young men, journalism students named Hussein and Redwan, have postponed their service pending their studies at Damascus University but are fearful they will be forced to serve. "I absolutely have to travel before I get called up for military service. I can't do it," Hussein said, stating he was working hard on improving his English in order to pursue a graduate degree in Canada and receive another postponement. "When I get back I will be too old, or I will pay the expatriate fee," he explained.

19. (C) "I will commit suicide before I have to go to the army," Redwan said jokingly. "I don't speak French or English so I can't go study in the West, but hopefully I can get a job in Dubai or some other place in the Gulf until I'm too old to be in the army," he said. "It's not fair that some guys have to go to the army and others don't. But there's no fairness in the world," he concluded.

110. (C) COMMENT: The fact the SARG has reduced the mandatory service requirement twice in the last four years may be a tacit acknowledgment of the law's unpopularity. Syria remains technically in a state of war with Israel, and official propaganda routinely cites the national service requirement as evidence of the commitment of Syrian youth to defending their country. Thus, it is unlikely the requirement will be scrapped anytime soon. Given anger among many young Syrians over the seemingly uneven application of the law, however, public pressure may continue for further reform of the service requirement in the years to come. END COMMENT.

HUNTER